

March 16, 2009

To the Legislative Members of the GAE Committee:

My name is Lisa Cheney and I am a resident of Waterbury. The following is my testimony about the effectiveness of the Parent Leadership Training Institute, a program sponsored by the Commission on Children. I offer this testimony in response to Governor's Bill 840, recommending elimination of the Commission and the Parent Trust Fund which provides funding to communities like mine for parent leadership training.

Two years ago my daughter, who was 14 at the time, developed severe sleeping disorder. Her lack of any substantial sleep severely inhibited her immune system so she was prone to every cold, flu and virus germ she came into contact with at school. By the time January came, she was no longer capable of going to school as she was chronically exhausted and sick. Instead of getting the support I thought her school would provide (the Waterbury Arts Magnet School), I was constantly threatened with her being held back because of excessive absences. This type of abuse at the hands of the school principal continued until the following year when I finally decided to take her out of the school system to home school.

Please understand that while I was fighting with the school over her lack of attendance, I was also seeking help from the medical community. I was keeping the school informed about the medical help she was receiving and supplying them with notes from her doctors.

Not until April, after she had been absent full time for over eight weeks, the school informed me that my daughter qualified under Section 504 to be tutored at home. She did not start with her tutors until May. There was only six weeks left to the school year and she was told she would have to complete all of the schoolwork she had missed plus any additional work inside of those six weeks in order to complete her grade. I was not happy with this as I felt the school was being unreasonable and not taking her unique situation into account. This problem led to many back and forth conversations between me, the tutors and the school.

Again, because of the school's inability to find an equitable solution and due to my own frustration, I decided to investigate exactly what the Section 504 law said. What I found out was interesting. The most important thing I discovered was that I should have been notified of her eligibility for tutoring after being absent for *3 weeks*. I was not told about this until she was out of school for *2 months* and to add insult to injury, *I was being told she had to complete 5 months of school assignments in six weeks*. I hope you can understand my frustration.

At this point, I tried to find someone, anyone who could help me advocate for my daughter. I tried calling the woman who was in charge of the Homebound Division (the agency who dispatched the tutors). When I informed her of my concern over not receiving tutors for my daughter in a timely fashion, she became angry and said, "How do I know your daughter wasn't truant?" Not exactly the kind of help the mother of a sick child needs.

When I called to speak to the Superintendent of Schools, I was constantly referred to the person in charge of situations like mine. In over six months of repeated phone calls to the Superintendent's office, I never spoke to either the parent liaison or the Superintendent.

Finally I got angry. I decided to call the office of Civil Rights in Washington, DC. I spoke to one of their agents and was told that yes, it sounded like I had a case, the school had not acted properly in addressing my daughter's situation and that I was entitled to file a grievance with the federal government against the school and the school district. They referred me to the regional office in Boston. I spoke to their contact and was forwarded the grievance form and told that once it was filed, the Civil Rights Commission would begin an investigation. I was told that if the school was found not to be in compliance with Section 504, it could potentially mean a suspension of any federal monies received by the school district. I *did not* file the grievance.

It's important to share my daughter's story with you so that you can understand why The Parent Leadership Training Institute is so important. You see, I am still very upset about how the people entrusted with the education and care of my child failed so miserably. Like many parents, I felt taking the legal route, in my case, by filing a grievance with the federal government, was the only way to get the system to work properly. I did not file the grievance though because I believe it is important to work with public officials to find an equitable solution to our problems.

However, I would not know how to do this effectively if it wasn't for PLTI. What I have learned in several months has given me the support, resources and contacts that I need to truly be an advocate for my daughter and others as well. So I guess the question you have to ask yourselves as you decide on the budget and what to cut and what to keep, is, does it make sound financial sense to allow parents to continue believing the courts are the only way to advocate for their children (or worse, have them disengage from the process entirely), or, do you provide money for quality training that will develop them as successful parent advocates with a plan and a voice?

I ask that you maintain funding for the Commission on Children and the Parent Trust Fund so that other parents and children can benefit as I have.

Respectfully submitted,

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